Lateral

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Review of *Dancing Indigenous Worlds: Choreographies of Relation* by Jacqueline Shea Murphy (University of Minnesota Press)

by Diana Duarte Bernal | Book Reviews, Issue 13.2 (Fall 2024)

ABSTRACT Jacqueline Shea Murphy's *Dancing Indigenous Worlds* deals with her participation in festivals, performances, and conversations with Indigenous dance artists, whose practices enact, register, and experience relationality. Relationality is both an expression of Indigenous ways of being and knowing and an integral part of dance work, including all the activities produced around it. Each chapter of the book explores in depth an aspect of relationality based on the work of an artist and the descriptions of the experiences and sensations that each of these has awakened in the author, both in the author's voice and that of her interlocutors.

KEYWORDS Indigenous peoples, dance, decolonial, performance, relationality

Dancing Indigenous Worlds: Choreographies of Relation. By Jacqueline Shea Murphy. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022. 408 pp. (paperback). ISBN 978-1-5179-1268-0. US List: $35.00.

I take on this review as part of an exploration of the intersections between ethnography and performance, looking for appropriate inquiry methods, ethical-methodological considerations, and epistemological implications in the research on dance practices of groups that are made subaltern. This is not a space to write more extensively about myself, but I make this brief introductory reference to give an account of where I stand when I meet *Dancing Indigenous Worlds:*

Choreographies of Relation. The importance of opening by introducing oneself to inform interlocutors of the position and limitations of the speaking voice is one of the lessons that the author, Jacqueline Shea Murphy, has, based on long relationships with Indigenous people, incorporated into her work, and that she shares with her readers in the preface of the book.

Dancing Indigenous Worlds is the result of several years of Shea Murphy's participation in festivals, performances, conferences, and meetings around dance in territories of what are known as Canada, New Zealand, the United States, and Australia. It focuses on the work of Indigenous dance artists of diverse origins, whose practices enact, register, and experience relationality as part of the recognition of, representation of, and ways of inhabiting different generational layers and histories through time, and the multiple human, non-human, and more than human worlds present beyond those imposed by colonizers (3). Each chapter of the book explores an angle of relationality based on the work of an artist and the descriptions of the experiences, feelings, and sensations that each of these has awakened in the author, in what she calls an "embodied scholarship" (45).

In the introduction, Shea Murphy presents the challenges that studying relationality offers for the different processes involved in research practice, including the ways of communicating, the possibility of contributing to the deepening of the crossings between dance studies and Indigenous studies, and the importance of accounting for the genealogies and epistemological debates that exist around the analytical categories that support the argument of the book and that are put in tension in it. An example of this is the centrality that the author gives to the choreographic as a result of the conversations she has held with Indigenous artists for several years, recognizing that this is a term that is part of a Eurocentric tradition of dance, in which individual authorship, the value of what happens on stage, and the access of elite groups are privileged.

However, the challenge that the author assumes is to discuss how Indigenous dance artists are rejecting and recalibrating the terms that coloniality has embedded in modern/contemporary dance (5) by activating experiences and practices of relationality. This involves understanding dance as an exercise of being with other bodies and entities, and of knowing, creating meaning, negotiating history, and tracing presence through time. It also means assessing the ephemeral and sporadic that occur both in the performance and in all the activities produced around it, instances of resurgence (8) that Shea Murphy considers fundamental to maintaining and regenerating language and knowledge within and among Indigenous communities, but not for the validation of settlers, tourists, or artistic foundations.

In the first chapter, "Choreographies of Relational Reciprocity," Shea Murphy exchanges insights with Māori choreographer Jack Gray about the creative process of *Mitimiti*, a dance work in which Gray explores his *whakapapa*[1] (Māori word that refers to ancestry, in terms of lineage and territorial roots). This muse is extended to other dancers of Atamira Dance Company for the assembly of the work and also allows the activation of relations between Indigenous communities from different parts of the world through the internet during the promotional campaign, thus installing a reflection on the expansive sense of performance. This and other experiences described by the author begin to give meaning to the Māori concept of *manaakitanga*, which refers to hospitality and reciprocal care, and both are promulgated as an integral part of all the spaces and connections generated by Indigenous dance beyond the stage.

"Choreographies of Perspectival Relationality" is the second chapter, which focuses on the work of choreographer Rulan Tangen and Dancing Earth: Indigenous Contemporary Dance Creations (DE). The training and creative method of this company opens spaces for inclusion and diversity of anatomies and dance techniques for anyone who has been affected in any way by colonization and wishes to explore relationships to or ruptures with their family

and history. In this way, for the author, relationality is manifested in the choreographic encounter of multiple ways of being and perceiving, recognizing the interconnection and interdependence of different positions, as well as the partiality of each gaze. In addition to observing these various positionalities of perspective in the work of Tangen and DE, throughout the chapter, Shea Murphy also uses the narrative voice of different "characters" as a resource to explore her own position in various situations.

"Interlude/Pause/Provocation" is a section in the middle of the book that invites us to stop and reflect on relationality from a situated and racialized perspective. Here, the author offers both a detailed description of the performance of Alutiiq choreographer Tanya Lukin Linklater, which is about the physical and symbolic erasure of women in her community at Refuge Rock, and the narration of the impressions, thoughts, and conversations generated by this work. For Shea Murphy, the artist's body promulgates the lineages of women who, with their presence and embodied knowledge necessary for existence (washing, singing, nesting, caring), represented a threat to colonial white authority. At the end of the section, the author includes the response received from Lukin Linklater to the draft of this text, expressing how she felt about her body as an Indigenous mother being read by a white academic, giving an account of the repercussions of addressing issues such as motherhood without considering the multiple violences to which Indigenous women have historically been exposed.

Chapter 3, "Choreographies of Relational Abun-dance," focuses on the work *SHORE* by Yu'pik choreographer Emily Johnson. The conceptual core is abundance, put in crisis in Western societies by distrust of states, the status quo, and the liberal-capitalist fantasies. However, precarity and scarcity are not perceived as new or contingent for Indigenous communities because since the beginning of the colonial project, they have seen their living conditions threatened and have experienced the dispossession of their bodies, lands, and worldviews. For Shea Murphy, *SHORE* is a piece that in its different moments (story,

performance, community action, and feast) expresses “abun-dance,” a term coined by Randy Martin to refer to the richness of the relational interdependence that dance promulgates with the generation of possibilities to cultivate attention towards embodied and sensory knowledge, and with feeling and experiencing in proximity to other bodies and entities.

The last chapter, “Choreographies of Relational Refusings,” begins with the narration of Shea Murphy’s participation in Yirramboi First Nations Arts Festival (Melbourne) and the notification of the protocol of a ceremony in which non-Indigenous people were requested to refrain from attending. This experience led her to review how she cultivates and enacts relationality in her research process, from her position as a white academic with training in modern dance. This leads her to reaffirm that work with Indigenous communities must be based both on respectful, responsible, and reciprocal attention and listening, and on the recognition of refusals as a performative way of interrogating white power and privilege and of addressing Indigenous agency (268).

Reviewing *Dancing Indigenous Worlds* was challenging because of the multiplicity of layers of information it reports and the “choreographed” narrative structure it achieves, combining experiences, feelings, sensations, and descriptions of the performances, both in the author’s voice and in that of her interlocutors. Undoubtedly, Shea Murphy consolidates a voluminous source of references to feed the research field of Indigenous Dance Studies and illustrates relationality through the practices she analyzes, the ways of producing knowledge, and the resources to communicate it, avoiding falling into the extractivist and colonial practices of the academy and stopping and apologizing when necessary. For these reasons, this book contributes not only to someone interested in decolonial and dance studies but also to those who want to do more humane research.

Notes

1. I only use Indigenous terms that are defined in the book, assuming the risk of occupying them in an erroneous way because of the lack of first-hand knowledge of their meaning. ↩

Author Information

Diana Duarte Bernal

Diana Duarte Bernal is a PhD Candidate in Territory, Space, and Society (Universidad de Chile), sponsored by ANID 2022 (National Agency for Research and Development). She earned a Master's degree in Cultural Management at the same university, where she currently works as a professor and is part of the editorial committee of its journal; she also holds a BA in Political Science (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogota). Diana is part of the Archivos Migrantes (Migrant Files) project, which is dedicated to the research and promotion of cultural practices of migrant communities in Chile. Her current research seeks to understand the processes of production and appropriation of urban spaces through dance by Latin American migrant women who have come to live in Santiago. She was born in Colombia and has lived in Chile for 13 years.

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